

Long-Form Listening

Here's a question for you: Is listening to an audiobook the same as reading? I believe that much of the tension surrounding the issue of audiobook listening by children and young adults stems from this issue. Parents and teachers strive to instill a love for reading in young people and often feel stymied by the intrusion of multimedia in everyday life. A casual glance at students on a school bus will support the claim that today's teens and tweens are connected to electronic gadgets 24/7.

But look more closely: the young lady at the front of the bus has Gail Carson Levine's *Fairest* on a CD player checked out from the school library; the boy at the back is tuned into Neil Gaiman's Newbery-winning *The Graveyard Book* on his iPod; and the techie in the middle row has downloaded the no-cost text of *Little Brother* to his cell phone from author Cory Doctorow's Web site, and is listening to the audiobook imported from iTunes. In the words of author Tamora Pierce, these young people are "stealth reading." Are they decoding text on a page? No. Are they engrossed in literature? Most certainly.

But what about those children who are learning the complexities of turning letters into words and words into meaning? Observe a kindergarten classroom with an MP3 player learning station, where headphone-clad children are bent over Carmen Agra Deedy's picture book *Martina the Beautiful Cockroach*, using the audiobook's soundscape and illustrations to gain clues to comprehending the text. Spot a toddler in a car seat, looking at William Steig's *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, tracing the text with a finger while the audiobook on Playaway provides the thousandth reading. Watch a second-grader press pause on the tape player, voice a perfectly fluid

imitation of author Jack Gantos' humorous narration of *Rotten Ralph*, then continue this pattern page by page. Audiobooks provide a pathway to reading success, with aural language leading to the love of literature.

The growing body of research on the role of audiobooks in literacy education validates the positive impact on discrete skills such as comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. (Visit the *Book Links* Web site at www.ala.org/booklinks and click on "Web Connections" for March 2009 to find research and resources about the benefits of audiobooks.) But I want to promote another advantage of literature out loud: the ability to be immersed in *long-form* listening.

Language arts classrooms across the country are striving to add more *short-form* texts into the reading curriculum, to study a short story rather than a novel or to examine an essay rather than a nonfiction book. The benefits of studying short texts are apparent: including a graphic novel of *Macbeth* addresses multiple learning styles; the elements of fiction are demonstrated through picture books in fewer classroom hours. Yet our students live in an increasingly short-form world: Wikipedia rather than research, text message rather than conversation. One often-overlooked literacy skill is that of stamina, the ability to stick with a story until the reader or listener falls into the tale. Audiobooks offer an ambience that allows listeners to become immersed in long-form literature.

Auditory learners may fall naturally into an audiobook novel, enthusiastically boasting that they have finished, for the first time, an entire chapter book. Yet others,

like me, must learn to build their long-form listening stamina. I have always been a compulsive reader and never felt I was a good listener. As part of the process of examining my practice as a school librarian for National Board Certification, I decided to put myself in the shoes of students who are not natural readers, yet must check out books from the library. For me, that meant that I must listen to books rather than read them. So I began to review audiobooks in a professional journal—I knew that I would never finish listening to one otherwise! I realized that you can learn how to listen and discover your own style. I cannot sit still and listen to audiobooks, but if I am busy with an automatic task—the daily commute, cooking, walking the dog, working out—I experience literature in a whole new way with audiobooks. As a very fast reader, I gulp print books. But the audiobook slows me down (something I had to get used to), and I gain an entirely different appreciation of the story.

In my middle-school library, I have begun to teach

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explicit audiobook listening skills in a single class period. I start with a large display of my favorite audiobooks, pairing a few with the print title (see the “Web Connections” sidebar for recommendations of the best audiobooks of 2008). I share with the class the discovery of my personal listening style. I list a variety of audiobook listening station options:

- Listening on the computer while watching the Media Player visualization, playing one of the basic Windows games such as Solitaire or Minesweeper, or drawing using Microsoft Paint.
- Listening on a portable CD player while seated at a table and drawing.
- Listening in one of the library’s comfy chairs, either with print book in hand or not.
- Listening while sprawled on the floor, with an optional eye bag made from a pantyhose sock and navy beans to block light.


Students choose an audiobook and spend the rest of the class period listening. The result? Amazed students who comment, “I thought you had to read while you listen,” “I didn’t know I could understand a book just by listening,” and “It’s so awesome how I can hear the story while doing something else!” I end the class by encouraging students to find their own listening style and remarking that I wish we had an exercise bike, Play-Doh, or knitting to try. As most teens and tweens have iPods rather than CD players, I give them permission to download the CDs to their MP3 players with the reminder that they must “return” the title by deleting it when finished. I ask if any students want to check out their

audiobook—and more than half the class will leave with audiobook in hand. (Visit the *Book Links* Web site at www.ala.org/booklinks and click on “Web Connections” for May 2008 to find more in-depth listening activities for your classroom or library.)

So often we assume that students have prior knowledge, believing that they already know what an audiobook is from experiences with cassette/picture-book

WEB CONNECTIONS

For a list of recent award-winning audiobooks, visit the *Book Links* Web site at www.ala.org/booklinks and click on “Web Connections.”

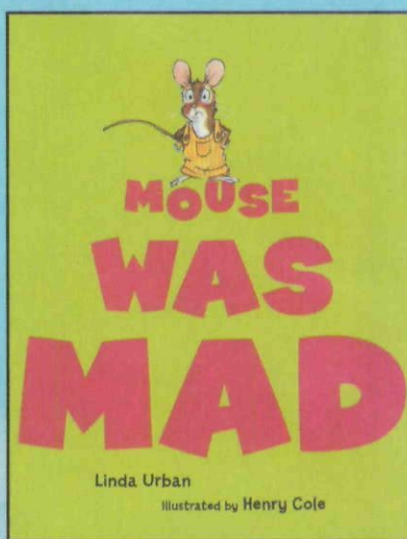
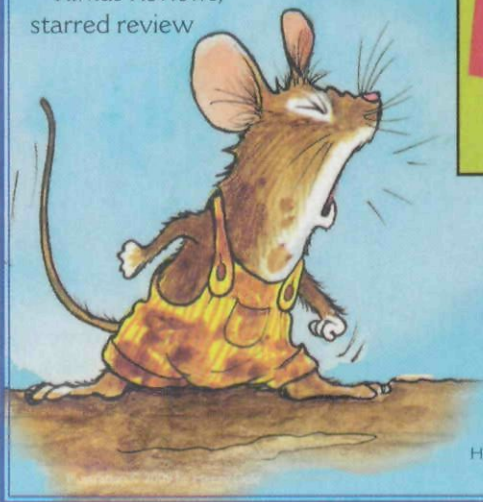
sets in the primary grades. But for today’s intermediate students, cassettes are archaic technology, and picture books with sound accompaniment are a far cry from listening to 27 hours of *Harry Potter* or *Twilight*’s 13-hour audiobook. Too many adults feel that a child must follow along with the text as they listen, a style that only frustrates many audiobook listeners. Just as we acknowledge a child’s reading preferences, we can help students learn ways to develop their listening skills. In a world of sound bites and spin doctors, the value of long-form listening and making sense of rhetoric is a vital language art. 

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From Linda Urban, author of
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starred review



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“This story about anger management proves to be both entertaining and therapeutic.”

—School Library Journal

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